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Johnny Cash (1932 - 2003)



BILL STEBER / TENNESSEAN FILE

Singer Sheryl Crow talks with Johnny Cash following the funeral for his wife, June Carter Cash, at First Baptist Church in Hendersonville in May.



AP PHOTO / UNIVERSAL

Johnny Cash is shown in this scene from his *Hurt* video. The video won a 2003 MTV Video Music Award for best cinematography.



TENNESSEAN FILE

Johnny Cash, in the spotlight at the 1969 Grammy Awards, held at Nashville's National Guard Armory.

appeared on a show celebrating the opening of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, recorded Willie Nelson's *Time of the Preacher* with a backing band that included members of Nirvana and Alice in Chains, and played a House of Blues set in Los Angeles with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

Petty and the Heartbreakers also were featured prominently on Mr. Cash's second Rubin-produced album, *Unchained*, released in November 1996. This album abandoned the all-acoustic approach, even using distorted, post-punk electric guitars for a cover of alternative rock band Soundgarden's *Rusty Cage*. But Rubin and Mr. Cash also included rockabilly songs, gospel material and a bracing take on Petty's ballad *Southern Accents*. *Unchained* garnered another round of positive reviews.

Mr. Cash was honored Dec. 8, as President Clinton and others applauded him upon receiving a Kennedy Center award. Vice President Al Gore had recommended Mr. Cash, assessing that Mr. Cash's music examined "the entire range of existence, failure and recovery, entrapment and escape, weakness and strength, loss and redemption, life and death."

Kristofferson, Emmylou Harris, Lyle Lovett, Robert Duvall and others joined Rosanne Cash in the televised Kennedy Center tribute, and Mr. Cash wiped tears during his daughter's performance. In *Cash*, he wrote that the attention was flattering but that there was a flip side.

"The day after the Kennedy Center show, I came further down to earth when my daughters got together with me and

nia. Fans and friends worried as Mr. Cash lay unconscious, breathing with the help of a ventilator.

But once again, he proved himself a survivor. Some had observed his reckless lifestyle in the 1960s and supposed he would drink and drug himself to death. Some watched his slow recovery from a late 1980s heart surgery and thought him not long for the world. And many thought the rare, ugly-sounding Shy-Drager syndrome would do him in. All were wrong.

The Grammy Awards of February 1998 found Mr. Cash once again victorious. Despite country radio's refusal to play material from *Unchained*, the album won a Grammy for best country album.

Even as he reeled from illness, Mr. Cash's pugnacious spirit made waves along Music Row, as he sanctioned an advertisement in *Billboard* magazine that March. "American Recordings and Johnny Cash would like to acknowledge the Nashville music industry and country radio for your support," read the text, while the page's dominant image was Jim Marshall's 1969 San Quentin photograph, with Mr. Cash raising his right hand's middle finger.

As spring rolled around, Mr. Cash began reappearing. He sang two songs at a private gathering in April, but waited until June for his return to a public stage. As Kristofferson performed *Sunday Morning Coming Down* during a Ryman Auditorium show, Mr. Cash walked out to join him. Kristofferson cried at the sight and sound of his old friend.

A televised tribute concert in 1999 at Manhattan's Hammerstein Ballroom gave Mr. Cash a chance to once again sing and play his own songs. Musicians including Emmylou Harris, Bruce Springsteen, Sheryl Crow and Wyckle Jean performed Mr. Cash's material and lavished praise on the icon, then 67 years old, but Mr. Cash's appearance was the night's undisputed highlight.

"If he felt the effects of his lingering disease, he didn't show it," Jay Orr wrote in *The Tennessean*. "Looking robust, his guitar slung behind him or held at a jaunty angle, Cash ambled confidently to the mike, began stroking his guitar strings up on the neck and launched into *Folsom Prison Blues*, with all the tics, head gestures and enthusiastic growls that characterized the performances of his prime."

Through much of 1999 and 2000, Mr. Cash was quietly compiling material for a third Rubin-produced album, this one to be titled *American III: Solitary Man*.

"I was very ill at the time," he later told *The Tennessean*. "I went into the studio on and off for a solid year, and I was never

pleased with any of my performances. But then I started getting better late last year, like November, and I started working really hard on this record."

In that October 2000 interview, Mr. Cash said that his health was improving and that the diagnosis of Shy-Drager had been erroneous.

"My doctor told me in November that if I'd had it, I'd be dead by now," he said. "She said, 'You're getting better, so you don't have Shy Drager's. And you don't have Parkinson's.'"

Instead doctors told Mr. Cash he had autonomic neuropathy, a group of symptoms caused by nerve damage. It is at times associated with diabetes, though Mr. Cash sometimes denied in interviews that he had diabetes.

Friend and fellow country legend Merle Haggard appeared on *American III*, singing a duet with Mr. Cash. Haggard told *The Tennessean*, "Johnny Cash and I are as close as two men can be," but he worried about Mr. Cash's condition:

"He's able to laugh and sing and joke, but he's in a lot of pain," Haggard said. "He lives in pain and chooses between pain and pain pills. The only way he can enjoy life is to put up with the pain and not have any pills, so that's what he does."

American III was released Oct. 22, 2000, and it was the first recorded evidence that Mr. Cash's voice had changed significantly. His characteristic boom had been replaced with a raspier, more fragile instrument. If anything, tracks such as *One* and *Field of Diamonds* and were more tender and poignant than Mr. Cash could have previously summoned.

The *Solitary Man* track from *American III* earned Mr. Cash his 10th Grammy award, this one for best male country vocal performance, on Feb. 21, 2001. That day, Mr. Cash was released from the hospital after another bout with pneumonia. Trips to the hospital, usually for pneumonia or bronchitis, were becoming routine.

While others noted Mr. Cash's 70th birthday in 2002 by singing his old songs (two tribute albums were released that year), the Man in Black chose to forge ahead with new recordings. He went back to work with Rubin, preparing for the album that would become *American IV: The Man Comes Around*.

While the American albums were filled with worthwhile material, one thing Mr. Cash had not done in a long time was to pen a song that stood on equal footing with classics such as *Big River* or *Flesh and Blood*. He rectified that with his new album's title song, as listeners would find upon the album's Nov. 5, 2002, release.

"I worked harder and longer on that song than on anything I've ever written," Mr. Cash told *The Tennessean*.

Though the title song's apocalyptic vision was a highlight of *American IV: The Man Comes Around*, it was a cover version of rocker Trent Reznor's *Hurt* that spurred the album to a place among the top five country albums on the *Billboard* chart. Mr. Cash said he recorded *Hurt* because it was "the best anti-drug song I'd ever heard."

"The needle tears a hole," wrote Reznor. "The old familiar sting/ Tried to kill it all away/ But I remember everything."

Director Mark Romanek worked on the award-winning video, combining clips of Mr. Cash as a young man with footage that depicted the aged superstar, and including shots of the closed-down, flood-damaged House of Cash museum in Hendersonville.

"The place was in such a state of dereliction," Romanek told MTV. "That's when I got the idea that we could be extremely candid about the state of Johnny's health: as candid as Johnny has always been in his songs."

As video channels put *Hurt* into rotation, *American IV* sold more than 200,000 copies. His new version of Sun recording *Give My Love to Rose* won Mr. Cash his 11th Grammy: this one for best male country vocal.

Mr. Cash's influence on non-Nashville, non-country artists was underscored during a Ryman concert by British rock band Coldplay earlier this year.

"So many of our heroes have played here," said Coldplay lead singer Chris Martin. "From Johnny Cash, all the way through to Johnny Cash, including Johnny Cash."

On May 15, 2003, Mr. Cash was faced with the loss of his wife, June Carter Cash.

"My dad has lost his greatest companion, his musical partner, his soul mate," said Rosanne Cash at the funeral. Mr. Cash sat in the front pew and was lifted to his feet at service's end. He leaned over his wife's casket, then was helped back to his chair and wheeled out of the church.

But in the following weeks, Mr. Cash returned to recording and addressed concerns about his health with stubborn wit, saying, "I plan to outlive all my children. I'm not going anywhere."

In June, Mr. Cash appeared in Maces Springs, Va., at the venue known as the Carter Family Fold. He was hoarse and weak, but he sang several songs and spoke to the crowd:

"I don't know hardly what to say tonight about being up here without her. The pain is so severe there is no way of describing it."

Music was Mr. Cash's primary balm in attempting to quell that pain. He was often at his studio, working on tracks for an *American V* album with musicians including Marty Stuart and Jack Clement. Hospitalized at Baptist for the past three weeks with a stomach ailment, he was released Tuesday amid plans to fly to California next week for more recording dates. Late Thursday, he was rushed back to Baptist.

Epilogue: Where Are Your Mountains?

In the coming days, artists of all stripes will lavish words of praise upon Mr. Cash.

He will be remembered as a fallible man who sought honor and peace.

He will be remembered as a force of music and of personality.

He will be remembered by some as the greatest of all country music artists, and by others as the tall, wild howler who gave Hank Williams a run for his money.

Questions, too, will remain. What was the source of his inner turmoil, or of his expansive yet singular musical vision?

How could an artist who should by 1994 have been well past his prime find within himself an explosion of creativity?

How could a man constantly surrounded by friends and family embody such loneliness?

And, as Mr. Cash once wrote of his friend Bob Dylan, "So where are your mountains to match some men?" ♦

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1990s

(Continued from previous page)

1997: After nearly falling down during a show in Michigan, Cash announces that he is suffering from

Parkinson's disease, and the diagnosis is later specified as Shy-Drager Syndrome, a degenerative nerve disease. Contracts double pneumonia and is placed on a ventilator at Baptist Hospital.

1998: Because of health issues, Cash disbands his touring group. *Unchained* wins a Grammy Award for best country album.

1999: Cash appears onstage at

New York's Hammerstein Ballroom during a televised tribute concert.

2000s

2000: Receives a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Announces

that the Shy-Drager diagnosis was incorrect. *Releases American III: Solitary Man*, an album that makes it to No. 11 on the *Billboard* country chart.

2001: Wins male country vocal per-

formance Grammy for *Solitary Man*. Announces that he is in fact suffering from autonomic neuropathy, a group of symptoms caused by nerve damage.

2002: *American*

IV: The Man Comes Around is released. It sells more than 200,000 copies, and a video for *Hurt* (a song Cash recorded that was written by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails) moves into rotation on CMT,

MTV and VH1.

2003: His *Give My Love To Rose* wins Grammy for male country vocal performance. June Carter Cash dies on May 15. Mr. Cash begins recording again

soon after the funeral, working on more music for the American label. *Hurt* wins an MTV Video Music Award for best cinematography, one of six nominations. Ill health prevented Mr. Cash from

attending the Aug. 28 awards ceremony in New York City.

Sept. 12, 2003: Dies at Baptist Hospital of complications from diabetes.